FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
BEAR LAKE ROAD IMPROVEMENT PROJECT
ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK

Bear Lake Road in Rocky Mountain National Park (RMNP) is one of the most popular scenic roads in the park and provides year-round access to a variety of recreation opportunities. A park-wide transportation study was initiated in 1999 to identify transportation-related problems and to recommend possible solutions. The study determined that substantial infrastructure work is necessary to repair and maintain deteriorating park roads, with an emphasis on improving Bear Lake Road. The reconstruction of Bear Lake Road was identified as a high priority project because of the deterioration of the pavement, the narrowness of the road, safety concerns, and the need for improvements to accommodate existing and future expansion of shuttle bus service. Safety is currently jeopardized due to tight curves on the steep upper portions of the road near Bear Lake and the lack of road shoulders along the road.

In the early 1970's, traffic began to exceed the parking capacity along Bear Lake Road. A shuttle bus service was first addressed in a transportation study completed in 1975. The 1976 Final Master Plan recommended the implementation of a shuttle bus service for the Bear Lake Road corridor. An experimental shuttle service was started in the late 1970's, and in 1982 the Bear Lake Development Concept Plan was approved implementing a permanent shuttle service operating during the summer months. The present shuttle bus service has been in existence since 1982. In the past, school buses were used for the shuttle service, but in 2000 and 2001 the park entered into a new service contract that included new shuttle buses that are exclusively used for the park shuttle bus service. The new, larger shuttle buses are causing damage to the road. Other road deficiencies, such as inadequate drainage, are impacting natural resources.

Rocky Mountain National Park developed an Environmental Assessment (EA) for improving Bear Lake Road in 2001. On September 20, 2001, the EA was released for public review. The public comment period ended on October 24, 2001. It was available for public review and comment for thirty (30) days, which provided an opportunity for public input on the alternatives. A preferred alternative was identified in the EA. Rocky Mountain National Park received 646 letters. The majority of the letters came in the form of 612 identical e-mails. A total of 638 (99%) of the 646 letters were in favor of the park's Preferred Alternative (Alternative 2), seven letters were in favor of Alternative 1, and only one letter favored Alternative 3. However, a majority of the respondents (627 letters) had concerns about the proposal to increase parking along the Bear Lake Road corridor, which would cause perceived increases in visitor use and associated impacts on natural resources, particularly along hiking trails and at destination areas in the backcountry of the park.

After a careful review of public comments, resource, economic and visitor impacts, the Preferred Alternative (Alternative 2) is selected for implementation, but with some revisions. Because of the public's concern about increasing parking capacity, there will be no net gain in parking capacity along the Bear Lake Road beyond the Visitor Transportation System (VTS) parking lot. Parking pullouts will still be reconfigured, formalized and paved to protect adjacent natural resources, but not expanded beyond current capacity. The EA called for an additional 39 parking spaces beyond the VTS parking lot and now those parking spaces will not be developed. There will be an increase in parking at the VTS parking lot. The present VTS parking lot cannot

accommodate present use during peak periods and vehicles frequently park outside designated parking spaces, jeopardizing the safety of visitors and park employees and impacting natural resources. When the VTS parking lot is full, park rangers or volunteers direct visitors to park along Bear Lake Road on the narrow road shoulder near the entrance to the VTS parking lot.

The VTS parking lot will be expanded from a current capacity of 208 parking spaces to 350 parking spaces. This increase in parking only at the VTS parking lot will accommodate present and expected future use. The additional parking spaces will also be needed during the reconstruction of Bear Lake Road when access will be limited primarily to the shuttle bus system. By not increasing parking spaces beyond the VTS parking lot, more visitors will have to park their vehicles and use the shuttle system. The National Park Service believes a shuttle bus system will benefit the park's natural and cultural resources and provide visitors an enjoyable park experience.

Most park trails are in good condition and funding has been available for trail maintenance. Two funded research projects are currently examining the quality of visitor experiences in the backcountry of the park. Park staff believes that most trails and destination areas in the park have not reached social carrying capacity and are not experiencing impacts to natural and cultural resources. About 95% of the park is recommended or designated wilderness and most of the backcountry receives little to moderate visitor use. There are specific areas that can be accessed from the Bear Lake Road, such as Sprague Lake, Bear Lake, Dream Lake, Emerald Lake and Alberta Falls, where there is perceived crowding from mid-morning to evening during the three busy summer months (June, July and August). Even these busy use areas have times of the day such as the early morning or evening when there is little visitation.

Alternative 2 minimizes environmental impacts to RMNP. Concerns identified during scoping and public review, and evaluated in the EA, include impacts to topography, geology, soils, water resources, vegetation, wetlands, wildlife and aquatic resources, threatened, endangered and rare species, air quality, the natural soundscape and light, cultural resources, and socioeconomic resources.

PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE (ALTERNATIVE 2)

The preferred alternative would reconstruct the existing road to a width of 24 feet (7.2 m) between Trail Ridge Road and the VTS parking lot, and to a width of 22 feet (6.6 m) between the VTS parking lot and Bear Lake. The existing 20-foot (6.1 m) wide road between the VTS and Bear Lake would be widened to 22 feet by constructing two 10-foot (3.0-m) travel lanes and 1-foot (0.3-m) shoulders to improve safety and accommodate shuttle buses. The posted speed limit for this section of the road would remain 25 miles per hour (40 kph), although speeds for sharp curves would be less. Curve widening at the switchback curves would be done to allow shuttle buses and vehicles less than 33 feet (10 m) in length to safely stay in the travel lane. There would be a travel recommendation for motorhomes and vehicles pulling trailers to not drive beyond the VTS parking lot. There would be no net increase in parking spaces between the VTS parking lot and the Bear Lake parking lot. There would be no net increase in parking spaces at the Bierstadt Lake and at Glacier Gorge parking lots even though these two parking areas would be reconfigured. The Glacier Gorge parking lot will be moved to the east where the overflow parking lot is presently located. This is being done to avoid the construction of a large retaining wall, minimize impacts to natural resources (including a wetland), and to make safety

improvements for park visitors who will no longer be required to cross Bear Lake Road on their way to and from the trailhead.

ENVIRONMENTALLY PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE (ALTERNATIVE 2)

The environmentally preferred alternative is the same as the preferred alternative (Alternative 2). Alternative 2 is a balance between minimizing environmental impacts from vehicles using the Bear Lake Road, and minimizing visitor impacts in the interior of the park. The preferred alternative will correct impacts to natural resources that are presently occurring as a result of deteriorating infrastructure and improper drainage. Alternative 2 will have the least long-term impact on the biological and physical environment. It accomplishes this without risking health or safety, and it does not create other undesirable or unintended consequences. After careful review, it has been determined that improving the Bear Lake Road while maintaining the current parking capacity beyond the VTS parking lot will not have any significant adverse environmental impacts to RMNP. The preferred alternative confines environmental impacts from vehicles to the road corridor and will protect nearby aquatic, wetland and other natural and cultural resources better than the other two alternatives analyzed in the EA. There will be no adverse impact due to visitor use in the backcountry away from the Bear Lake Road corridor.

OTHER ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED IN THE EA AND RECOMMENDED DURING THE PUBLIC REVIEW

Alternative 1 -- No Action (No Road Reconstruction or Parking Improvements)

There would be no reconstruction. The existing road would remain 24 feet (7.2 m) wide between Trail Ridge road and Tuxedo Park, and 20 to 22 feet (6.1 to 6.6 m) wide between Tuxedo Park and Bear Lake. Parking capacity would remain the same at the VTS parking lot and parking areas along the road corridor. The road pavement and structural integrity would continue to deteriorate. Deterioration is likely to occur at an accelerated rate due to the impacts caused by the new shuttle buses. Erosion of fill slopes from inadequate drainage would continue. Damage to roadside vegetation would continue as vehicles pull off the road and park at numerous informal pullouts. The narrow road would not correct visitor safety concerns, and shuttle buses would be unable to safely negotiate sharp curves or narrow sections of roadway without entering the oncoming traffic lane. Snowplow operations would continue to jeopardize visitor and park employee safety during the winter months.

Adjacent to the road corridor, there would be a direct impact on vegetation, aquatic, wetland and riparian communities and potential indirect and cumulative impacts to soil, and wildlife due to the deteriorating road.

Alternative 3 Less Restrictive (Reconstruct the Existing Roadway with a 24-foot Pavement Width)

Alternative 3 is identical to Alternative 2 between Trail Ridge Road and the VTS parking lot. Between the VTS parking lot and Bear Lake, the road would be widened from the existing width of 20 feet (6.1 m) to a width of 24 feet (7.2 m). This would include 11-foot (3.3 m) wide travel lanes and 1-foot (0.3 m) wide shoulders. Widening to 24 feet (7.2 m) in this section of road would accommodate larger recreational vehicles. The proposed increase in parking spaces

beyond the VTS parking lot as described in the EA would remain a part of this alternative. There would be 39 more vehicle parking spaces developed between the VTS parking lot and the Bear Lake parking lot. The number of parking spaces would be increased at the Bierstadt Lake parking lot and trailhead, and at the Glacier Gorge parking lot and trailhead.

This alternative would have a greater impact on resources within RMNP due primarily to the extensive cuts and fills and larger retaining walls that would be needed to accommodate a 24-foot wide road. There would be a greater cumulative impact to soil, vegetation, aquatic wetland and riparian communities due to road construction.

OTHER ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED DURING THE PLANNING PROCESS BUT EXCLUDED FOR CONSIDERATION IN THE EA

Resurface the Existing Road

This alternative includes an overlay of new pavement, but does not repair deficiencies in road subgrade, slope, or drainage. The road would not be widened and parking improvements would not be implemented. Maintenance costs would increase in the long-term if structural and drainage deficiencies were not corrected. The narrow road would continue to create safety issues for visitors and shuttle buses, and snowplows would not be able to stay within traffic lanes on sharp curves and narrow roadway sections. This alternative was excluded from further consideration because it would not address the source of deteriorating road conditions, safety concerns, and improvements needed for the shuttle bus service.

Realign the Roadway

The park considered a road realignment of the upper section of the road near Bear Lake to eliminate the switchback curves. This alternative would take a more direct but steeper route to Bear Lake, and would require extensive new disturbance in undeveloped areas. The abandoned section of the existing road would be reclaimed following construction. This alternative was excluded from further consideration because of significant adverse impacts to natural resources and the expected high cost for new road construction.

Reconstruct the Existing Roadway with a 22-foot Pavement Width

This alternative includes reconstructing the road to a width of 22-feet (6.6 m) throughout, except for the existing 24-foot (7.2 m) wide section between Trail Ridge Road and Tuxedo Park. This alternative is similar to the preferred alternative, but does not include widening to 24 feet in the 2.3-mile (3.7-km) section between Tuxedo Park and the VTS parking lot. This alternative was excluded from further consideration because the difference in environmental impacts between a 22-foot road and a 24-foot road between Tuxedo Park and the VTS parking lot are minor in this segment. Both road widths would result in similar land disturbance and retaining wall construction. In addition, average daily traffic volume between Trail Ridge Road and the VTS parking lot is double the volume between the VTS parking lot and Bear Lake. Also, a greater volume of large-size recreational vehicles must be accommodated in this section because they require access to the Glacier Basin Campground. The 24-foot roadway included in the preferred alternative better accommodates traffic and improves safety for visitors and park employees.

WHY THE PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE WILL NOT HAVE A SIGNIFICANT EFFECT ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

As defined in 40 CFR §1508.27, significance is determined by examining the following criteria:

Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse

The present Bear Lake Road is substandard and deteriorating which is causing adverse impacts to natural resources. Improving the road and increasing parking capacity at the VTS parking lot while not increasing parking capacity beyond the VTS parking lot will be a benefit to natural and cultural resources and a benefit to present and future visitor recreational needs. There will be a net long-term benefit to environmental resources along the road corridor. Resources within the interior of the park away from the road corridor will continue to be protected as long as funding for trail maintenance remains adequate. With an increase in parking spaces at the VTS parking lot, more visitors will be able to park their vehicles and use the shuttle bus system. There will be a benefit to the visitor's park experience due to less traffic congestion.

The Park anticipates that recreation use and visitation will continue to increase. The preferred alternative will cause a shift in visitor use. Fewer visitors are expected to drive beyond the VTS parking lot during peak use periods, and more visitors are expected to use the shuttle bus service. This will ease traffic congestion and be a benefit to natural resources, especially air and water resources along the road corridor. The anticipated increase in backcountry use could have some unknown long-term impacts that may need to be mitigated in the future. Current mitigating measures that are preventing adverse impacts in the backcountry include good trail maintenance and monitoring. The purchase of state-of-the-art trail usage counters and ongoing research will provide park staff with reliable information on trail use and visitor attitudes related to social carrying capacity.

No significant adverse effects to natural or cultural resources were identified for the preferred alternative. Impacts of other alternatives varied and are described in the EA.

Degree of effect on public health or safety

The reconstruction of Bear Lake Road was identified as a high priority project because of the deterioration of the pavement, the narrowness of the road, and safety concerns. Between 1994 and 2000 there were 68 vehicle accidents along Bear Lake Road. Improving the Bear Lake Road – which could take up to five years – is a key component of a park-wide transportation study. There is a clear need for improvements to accommodate existing and future visitor use, and specifically to handle current and anticipated future shuttle bus use. The road west of the VTS parking lot will be closed to visitor traffic but open to shuttle buses during reconstruction. Visitors using the Glacier Creek Livery and Sprague Lake picnic area will still be able to drive to these locations during road reconstruction. Public health and safety will not be jeopardized during road construction and will improve once road reconstruction is complete.
During snow events, visitor safety is compromised during snowplowing operations. On the narrow road section above the VTS parking lot, and especially on the switchbacks, the plow blade encroaches on the oncoming traffic lane. The reconstruction of Bear Lake Road will provide a safer road for visitors and park employees during the winter months. The Park will continue to maintain a 25-mph speed limit. The new road will reduce the risk of accidents.

Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas

As described in the EA, no significant effects to natural or cultural resources were identified for the preferred alternative. There are no prime farmlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas that will be negatively affected. Substantial infrastructure work is necessary to repair and maintain the deteriorating Bear Lake Road that may result in siltation and turbidity in Glacier Creek and Mill Creek during construction, but with no long-term negative impacts. Mitigation measures will be used to minimize impacts to wetland habitat. Moderate impacts will occur to 0.22 acres of wetlands during reconstruction. Monitoring will occur during reconstruction to ensure that mitigation measures proposed in the EA will protect wetlands and aquatic resources. In the long-term, minor improvements to water quality would occur from correction of existing road drainage deficiencies. There will be no major, adverse impacts to wetlands from the implementation of the preferred alternative.

Degree to which effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial

On September 20, 2001, a Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) was released for public review. The public comment period ended on October 24, 2001. Rocky Mountain National Park received 646 letters. Although there was some dispute about the magnitude of potential effects, 627 letters favored the preferred alternative. Public input led to a decision to not increase parking capacity along the Bear Lake Road between the VTS parking lot and the Bear Lake parking lot. The implementation of the preferred alternative minimizes environmental impacts to the park and supports the conclusion drawn in the EA that there are no highly controversial effects on the quality of the human environment.

Degree to which the possible effects on the quality of the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks

As previously described, the risks associated with the preferred alternative relate to environmental, social, and economic impacts. As described in the EA and in this Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI), the preferred alternative minimizes the effects to natural resources along the road corridor and to natural and cultural resources along hiking trails that lead away from the road corridor. No highly uncertain, unique or unknown risks were identified.

Degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration

The action for this project will not set any NPS precedent. The preferred alternative will not have significant effects and does not represent a decision in principal about any future consideration in Rocky Mountain National Park or elsewhere in the National Park System.

Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts

Implementing the preferred alternative will have no cumulative significant negative impact on natural and cultural resources within the park. The Park anticipates that recreation use and visitation will continue to increase with visitation expected to be about 4.9 million by 2020. The reconstruction of Bear Lake Road will improve the safety of the road for motorists, snowplow operators and shuttle buses. The preferred alternative is expected to cause a shift in visitor use. Fewer visitors are likely to drive beyond the VTS parking lot during peak use periods, and more visitors are expected to use the shuttle bus service. This will ease traffic congestion and be a benefit to natural resources, in particular air and water resources along the road corridor. Visitation at popular destination areas accessed from the Bear Lake Road is expected to increase, which could result in long-term minor cumulative impacts at specific locations, but not throughout the backcountry. Perceived crowding is presently limited to specific areas and to specific time periods in a day during the peak use season and impacts to natural resources are currently being controlled by good trail maintenance, signing and limited fencing. Ongoing research will provide park staff with reliable information on visitor use in the backcountry. Crowding is not expected to significantly increase with the reconstruction of the Bear Lake Road. Improving the Bear Lake Road, encouraging the use of existing loop trails, and ongoing maintenance of hiking trails will minimize this impact.

Implementing the preferred alternative will result in a long-term benefit to resources along the road corridor. Long-term impacts due to increases in visitation will be better managed and are not at this time considered to be significantly adverse. No other cumulative impacts have been identified.

Degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed on National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.

The preferred alternative will have no effect on objects listed on the National Register of Historic Places, nor will it cause destruction of significant scientific, cultural or historical resources.

Degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its critical habitat

The existing road and recreation activities in the project area are not known to cause direct adverse impacts to any threatened, endangered, or sensitive species. However, on-going recreation and human activities within the Bear Lake Road corridor and at backcountry locations accessed from Bear Lake Road may indirectly affect some sensitive species. The reconstruction

alternatives are not likely to adversely affect lynx, greenback cutthroat trout, boreal toad or the bald eagle.

Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, state, or local environmental protection law

This action violates no federal, state, or local environmental protection laws.

Impairment

In addition to reviewing the list of significance criteria, the NPS has determined that implementation of the preferred alternative will not constitute an impairment to Rocky Mountain National Park's resources and values. This conclusion is based on a thorough analysis of the environmental impacts described in *the Environmental Assessment for the Bear Lake Road Improvement Project*, the public comments received, relevant scientific studies, and the professional judgement of the decision-maker guided by NPS *Management Policies* (December 27, 2000). Road reconstruction activities will be confined to the road corridor. There will be temporary impacts to the natural soundscape beyond the road corridor during construction, but no long-term impacts. The preferred alternative will protect and enhance a visitor's park experience. Overall, the implementation of the preferred alternative results in minor long-term benefits to park resources and values, and opportunities for their enjoyment with no impairment.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

A scoping meeting was held in Estes Park on May 24, 2001 to solicit public input about the future of the Bear Lake Road. Working in concert with Rocky Mountain National Park and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), ERO Resources Corp. developed an Environmental Assessment (EA) for improving Bear Lake Road. On September 20, 2001 the EA was released for public review and mailed to 157 individuals and organizations. The EA was available for public review and comment for thirty (30) days through October 24, 2001, which provided an opportunity for public input on the alternatives. A preferred alternative was identified in the EA.

Rocky Mountain National Park received 646 letters via regular mail, fax, and email. The majority of the letters came in the form of 612 "form e-mail" letters organized by a non-governmental organization (95% of all letters received). A total of 638 (99%) of the 646 letters were in favor of the park's Preferred Alternative (Alternative 2), seven letters were in favor of Alternative 1, and only one letter favored Alternative 3. However, a majority of the public who commented on the EA (627 letters) had concerns about the proposal to increase parking capacity along the Bear Lake Road and the additional impact that this would have on natural resources and carrying capacity. Most believed this would lead to increased visitor use and associated impacts on natural resources, particularly in the backcountry of the park away from the road corridor. All comments warranting an NPS response are addressed in the response to public comments and errata sheets attached to this FONSI. Because of concerns expressed by the public, the decision has been made to not increase the parking capacity along Bear Lake Road except at the VTS parking lot.

The FONSI and the response to public comments will be sent to everyone who commented on the EA. The environmental assessment along with the FONSI will be posted on the Internet. A

postcard explaining the final decision and how to access the two documents will be sent to everyone who responded during the public review period.

CONCLUSION

The preferred alternative does not constitute an action that normally requires preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The preferred alternative will not have a significant effect on the human environment. Negative environmental impacts that could occur are limited to the road corridor and considered minor to negligible. There are no unmitigated adverse impacts on public health, public safety, threatened or endangered species, sites or districts listed or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, or other unique characteristics of the region. No highly uncertain or controversial impacts, unique or unknown risks, known cumulative effects or elements of precedence were identified. Implementation of the action will not violate any federal, state, or local environmental protection law.

The preferred alternative (Alternative 2) will be implemented in the fall of 2002 and reconstruction could continue until 2007.

Based on the foregoing, it has been determined that an EIS is not required for this project and thus will not be prepared.

Recommended: Anthony J. Schetzsle — Acting Superintendent — 5-7-02 — Date

Approved: — for Intermountain Regional Director — 5/15/02 — Date

Response to Public Comments and Errata Sheets
Bear Lake Road Improvement Project
Rocky Mountain National Park

Comments received during the 30-day public comment period were focused on perceived social crowding, and impacts to natural resources due to increasing the parking capacity along the Bear Lake Road. The majority of the public that sent in comments believed crowding would occur in high use areas in the backcountry and along hiking trails.

As a result of the public concerns that were expressed, the decision was made that there would be no net increase in the number of parking spaces between the VTS parking lot and the Bear Lake parking lot. At the VTS parking lot, 142 new parking spaces will be added (a total of 350 parking spaces). One of the reasons for increasing the capacity at the VTS parking lot is to accommodate the increased parking demand during road reconstruction. During construction most visitors will be required to use the shuttle bus system to travel beyond the VTS parking lot. Only visitors going to the Glacier Creek Livery and Sprague Lake picnic area will be allowed to drive beyond the VTS parking lot.

Public Comments:

Alternative 1 – Comments

1. *Opposed to widening the Bear Lake Road and providing more parking along the sides of the road. Preference is to keep the road narrow and fit the vehicles to the road rather than the road to the vehicles.*

Visitation has steadily increased since the park was established in 1915. During its first year of existence 15,000 visitors entered Rocky Mountain National Park. In 2000, visitation was 3.3 million, and based on the current trend it is expected to reach 4.9 million by 2020. It is anticipated that traffic congestion on park roads will get worse. Peak daily traffic on Bear Lake Road in 2000 was 5,825 vehicles, with an average of 2,924 vehicles per day. There have been 68 documented vehicle accidents on Bear Lake Road between 1994 and 2000. Some of the accidents were attributed to the road surface, poor sight distance and motorist's difficulties in negotiating the narrow road, which has no shoulders in some locations. The park's goal for the reconstruction of Bear Lake Road and development of a comprehensive transportation system is to encourage the use of a shuttle bus system, which will get more visitors out of their vehicles and thereby reduce traffic congestion. The shuttle bus system will not work effectively in the future unless Bear Lake Road is improved to safely handle the shuttle buses, and visitors have a place to park their vehicles. Public use is part of the park's mandate and visitor safety is a valid concern. However, due to the concerns expressed by the public that reviewed the EA, there will be no net increase in parking along the Bear Lake Road except at the VTS parking lot, where 142 new parking spaces will be added.

Alternative 2 -- Comments

1. *The EA does not provide an adequate justification for increasing the number of parking spaces by 30%.*

Please refer to the previous response for Alternative 1.

The preferred alternative that was outlined in the EA proposes the development of 39 more parking spaces in various places along the road between the VTS parking lot and the Bear Lake parking lot. Because of concerns raised by the public during the comment period this is no longer proposed. Parking pullouts and parking areas will still be reconfigured and those that are unpaved will be paved to minimize impacts to natural resources, but no additional parking spaces will be added between the VTS parking lot and Bear Lake. The existing Glacier Gorge parking lot will be closed and moved further east as discussed in the EA, but there will be no net gain in parking spaces. The Bierstadt Lake Trailhead parking lot will also be reconfigured and paved, but the parking capacity will not be expanded.

In 2001 the park entered into a new service contract for shuttle bus service, which replaced the school buses that had been used previously with new, larger shuttle buses. Visitor response to the new shuttle buses has been favorable, and during the first year of operation ridership increased by 38%. It is anticipated that visitor use of the shuttle buses will increase. On busy days the VTS parking lot frequently fills to capacity and visitors park their vehicles in non-designated areas along the edges of the parking lot or on the narrow road shoulder along Bear Lake Road. The large number of vehicles parking outside designated parking spaces impacts roadside vegetation and jeopardizes the safety of visitors entering and exiting from their vehicles. There is a need to increase the size of the VTS parking lot from its current capacity of 208 spaces to 350.

2. *The planning for the Bear Lake Road seems to be done as an end in itself. The park should first of all determine what is the carrying capacity of the Bear Lake area for both animals and visitors, and park management should also determine the type of visitor experience the Park wants visitors to have. Only then should transportation planning be done.*

The park's 1915 enabling legislation includes "*freest use of said park for recreational purposes*." Public use of the park is part of our mandate along with the preservation of natural and scenic resources. Carrying capacity is always considered in the management of Rocky Mountain National Park. Monitoring indicates that day users account for the largest percentage of visits to backcountry/wilderness areas of the park. Based on research conducted in1977, it was estimated at that time that about 700,000 day users used the backcountry each year. Most visitors only spent a short period of the day in the park and hiked no further than one mile from a trailhead. From a 1996 visitor use survey we learned that the average length of stay in the park is 2.64 hours, and 90 percent of park visitors spend 5 hours or less in the park. Results from the 1996 survey also indicated that about 48% of the visitors planned to do some hiking. By applying this percentage to current visitation it is estimated that 1.58 million visitors plan to do some hiking in the park this year. That is a 126% increase from the 1977 estimate. Monitoring conducted in 2001 indicates that most visitors who drive or use the shuttle buses still do not walk far from a road or trailhead. Installation of state-of-the-art trail usage counters and the results of current research will provide park staff with up-to-date information on how far visitors hike. In

the Bear Lake Road Corridor, the areas that experience particularly heavy visitor use are the trails around Sprague and Bear Lakes (considered front country trails), and the trails to Alberta Falls and Dream Lake (less than one mile from the trailhead). Other areas such as the hiking trails to Mills Lake, Loch Vale, Bierstadt Lake, the trail between Dream Lake and Emerald Lake, and along the Flattop Mountain Trail also receive heavy use, but not at the numbers observed nearer the road. Visitors will encounter fewer people if they visit other less popular destinations (Black Lake, Andrews Glacier or Sky Pond), if they visit at off-peak times, or travel further into the backcountry.

A backcountry permit system was developed in the late 1960's and a reservation system was initiated in 1974 and improved in 1976. The amount of use that is occurring in backcountry campsites that can be accessed from the Bear Lake Road has remained roughly the same since the early 1980's.

We are looking at ways to disperse use along the Bear Lake Road. There are several loop trails that can be accessed by the shuttle system that would reduce congestion (i.e., visitors don't have to walk out and back on the same trail). The shuttle system improvements, including shelters and better signing, will help to facilitate use of these loop trails.

Our hiking trails for the most part meet park trail standards, and we focus adequate funding and personnel on trail maintenance. We are managing the visitor use we receive now and we do not believe we have a carrying capacity problem at this time except at possibly some specific locations during heavy use periods during the busy summer season. Ongoing and future research, which includes visitor surveys, will provide valuable information on visitor perceptions about crowding. We do not believe that the added capacity at the VTS parking lot will result in a significant negative impact on visitor experience or lead to increased resource damage.

Because a large number of comments received during the public review period included concerns about carrying capacity, there will be no net increase in the number of parking spaces between the VTS parking lot and the Bear Lake parking lot. There will be additional parking spaces provided at the VTS parking lot. This is being done to facilitate shuttle bus use that will help to reduce traffic congestion on Bear Lake Road between the VTS parking lot and Bear Lake. A shuttle bus system has been in operation along the Bear Lake Road for over 20 years.

3. *If there are more places to park (increasing parking by 30%) it must be acknowledged that it will result in additional impacts on wildlife, vegetation, trail conditions, crowding etc. Crowding and determining the social carrying capacity should be addressed as an impact topic.*

Please refer to the response for comment #2.

4. *Over time, the Bear Lake Road corridor has been incrementally affected by various changes. The current proposal adds parking capacity (with numbers that appear to be arbitrary). Without a comprehensive look at the social and biological capacity of the area to accommodate visitor use, there are no criteria by which to determine when the additions should stop. It is critical that a more comprehensive analysis is needed than that provided in the draft document.*

Please refer to the response for comment #2.

5. *Some parts of the EA seem premature because it does not have the ability to fully consider the Transportation Plan that is currently being developed.*

Improving the Bear Lake Road, which could take five years, is an integral part of the park-wide transportation study. A shuttle bus system along Bear Lake Road has been in place for over 20 years. The park-wide Transportation Plan currently being developed proposes an expansion of the shuttle bus system that is linked to the Bear Lake Road system. We do know at this time that a transportation system along Bear Lake Road will not work without the shuttle bus system, and improving the Bear Lake Road is necessary to safely handle vehicular traffic and the shuttle buses. A park-wide shuttle system appears to be needed based on expected increases in traffic park-wide, and traffic congestion that is occurring at places such as the Alpine Visitor Center and along the Fall River Road. The park's Transportation Plan will be released for public review and comment either as an Environmental Assessment (EA) or an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

Our decision to implement the preferred alternative for the Bear Lake Road Improvement Project is based on choosing the alternative that best protects natural and cultural resources, while meeting the current and expected needs of our visitors. The preferred alternative will have long-term beneficial effects on natural and cultural resources and park visitors and is consistent with the act establishing RMNP. It is also consistent with the park's Final Master Plan, which recommended a shuttle bus system along Bear Lake Road.

6. *How can the Bear Lake Road EA, which calls for increasing car and bus use, be considered in line with the 1976 Master Plan that specifically states, "The private automobile should be eliminated from the dead-ending Bear Lake Road during peak use periods. Access, then to this heavily used area should be by public transportation."*

We currently do not see a need to completely close the road to private vehicles during peak use periods. Most visitors are forewarned that parking areas that are located beyond the VTS parking lot will be full from about 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. on busy summer days. However, reconstructing the Bear Lake Road does not preclude park management from making a decision to close portions of the road in the future, while continuing to allow shuttle bus access and limited private vehicle access. The road improvements are needed to safely handle current and future shuttle bus traffic and snow plowing operations during the winter when the shuttle buses are not running. With a visitor-friendly shuttle bus system, we anticipate that visitor access by private automobile beyond the VTS parking lot will decrease and not increase.

Based on the upward trend in visitor use, we believe that improving Bear Lake Road and public transportation is necessary. One of the primary reasons for reconstructing the road is to meet the needs of a public transportation system. Unpaved pullouts along the Bear Lake Road corridor do need to be paved and formalized, which can be done without increasing the current number of parking spaces. These informal pullouts are not clearly delineated and impacts to soil and vegetation are occurring when visitors park illegally. Soil erosion and loss of vegetation beyond the road corridor is occurring at unacceptable levels. Paving the pullouts, establishing curbs and improving drainage will help minimize the impacts.

7. *There should be less emphasis on increased parking, paving and pullouts. There should be more emphasis on alternative forms of transportation (e.g. public shuttle buses) and other means to address capacity issues.*

There will be no increase in parking beyond the VTS parking area. Please refer to response for comment #6.

8. *The shuttle bus system is the only way to be proactive and prevent further damage.*

We agree and please refer to the response for comment #6.

9. *An alternative should be considered that eliminates automobile use on the road during the peak season.*

Please refer to the response for comment #6.

This option does not meet the need of rock climbers and other visitors going on extended backpacking or day use trips. These visitors need to access a parking lot in the early morning and often do not return until late in the day after shuttle buses stop running. It is not economically feasible to have shuttle buses running in the early morning or late in the day other than during road reconstruction. A more feasible option would be to close the road beyond the VTS parking lot to automobiles during peak hours in a day. The road reconstruction does not preclude this option from being implemented in the future.

10. *An alternative to reconstruct the road without increasing parking capacity should be considered.*

Because of the concerns expressed by the public about expanding parking capacity, there will be no net increase in the number of parking spaces between the VTS parking lot and the Bear Lake parking lot. However, the VTS parking lot is being expanded from 208 parking spaces to 350 parking spaces in order to facilitate shuttle bus use. We will continue to strongly encourage visitors to park their cars and use the shuttle bus system. A shuttle bus system will not work now or in the future unless visitors have a place to park their vehicles. We will design the VTS parking lot to accommodate growth in shuttle use in a way that minimizes resource impacts.

11. *Human encroachment is detrimental to keeping parks pristine and therefor wildlife. We definitely do not need any more parking spaces.*

Please refer to the response for comment #10.

12. *I applaud the Park's proposal to pave the gravel pullouts but question the need to increase parking capacity.*

Please refer to the response for comment #10.

13. *Keep the wilderness character of the park intact rather than catering to the ever-burgeoning vehicular tourist traffic that will detract from the main purpose of a national park to protect and preserve the natural features of the area for future generations.*

Please refer to the response to comment #2. Approximately 95% of Rocky Mountain National Park is recommended or designated wilderness. The vast majority of the park is not impacted by visitor use and truly meets the definition of wilderness. A 1996 visitor use survey revealed that 52% of park visitors only use the roads and overlooks in the park. About 48% of the visitors surveyed in 1996 took some sort of hike. The 1996 survey and another survey conducted in 1977 reveals that most visitors who hike go no further than one mile from a road. We are currently doing further research and installing trail usage counters to better define how far visitors hike. Only about 1% of the park is developed with roads, campgrounds and buildings.

Accommodating vehicular traffic is a part of our mandate to provide for "*freest use of the park for recreation purposes*." Confining vehicular use to narrow road corridors meets the need for recreational use while minimizing impacts to park flora and fauna. The preferred alternative strikes a balance between preservation and allowing for recreational opportunities.

14. *There is going to have to be a point at which the number of vehicles allowed on the road at any one time are going to have to be limited.*

Vehicles driving on Bear Lake Road are presently limited. There is a sign just before the VTS parking lot turnoff that warns visitors when the parking lots ahead are full and advises visitors to use the shuttle buses. Rangers and volunteers are often stationed at the VTS turnoff, at Glacier Gorge and the Bear Lake parking lot to warn visitors that the parking lots are full. We also warn visitors that the parking lot is full at places like Wild Basin. Implementing the preferred alternative does not preclude the park from further limiting vehicle access in the future.

15. *Definitely, something has to be done because of all the traffic the Bear Lake Road gets but in so doing, we have to protect the environment.*

We wholeheartedly agree. Our decision to implement the preferred alternative is based on choosing the alternative that best protects natural and cultural resources, while meeting the current and expected needs of our visitors.

16. *I would hate to see the width of the road increased to allow very large RVs and commercial buses to drive to Bear Lake.*

There is presently no restriction in place for large RVs or commercial buses, but there is a sign asking visitors with vehicles pulling trailers and motorhomes to park at the VTS parking lot and use the shuttle buses. During reconstruction, no private vehicles will be allowed beyond the VTS parking lot other than visitors who are going to the Glacier Creek Livery or the Sprague Lake picnic area. Once reconstruction is complete, private vehicles and commercial buses will

be able to drive to Bear Lake. Visitors driving motorhomes or vehicles pulling trailers will still be asked to use the shuttle buses.

17. *Any future plans for Rocky Mountain National Park should ensure that visitors with disabilities will be allowed to drive to Bear Lake and that there will be designated parking spaces. Shuttle bus schedules should be designed to allow time for wheelchairs to be loaded and unloaded.*

Designated parking spaces for disabled visitors will remain at Bear Lake and Sprague Lake and at picnic areas, and will be designed into the reconfiguration of the VTS parking lot. The shuttle buses are designed to accommodate visitors with wheelchairs. Bus schedules are always flexible and will allow for whatever time is necessary to load and unload a wheelchair.

During the actual Bear Lake Road reconstruction disabled visitors will not be able to drive to Bear Lake, but will be able to drive to Sprague Lake. They will have to use a shuttle bus to access Bear Lake or other locations between the VTS parking lot and Bear Lake.

18. *There is a concern that access to trailheads during road construction will be hindered due to road closures. Pre-dawn or earlier starts are often necessary by rock climbers to attempt many of the climbs accessed from the Glacier Gorge and Bear Lake Trailheads. Will visitors be stranded if they arrive at a trailhead after the shuttle has stopped running for the day?*

Because of safety concerns, it will not be feasible to leave a lane open during nighttime road closures. Private vehicles will not be allowed above the VTS parking turnoff during road reconstruction except for those visitors going to the Glacier Creek Livery or Sprague Lake picnic area. Reconstruction of the Bear Lake Road from the VTS turnoff to Bear Lake is anticipated to occur from April through October of 2003 and April through October of 2004. During reconstruction, shuttle buses will start earlier in the day and run later at night. It has not yet been determined what the exact time schedule will be, but from 5:00 a.m. or 6:00 a.m. until 9:00 p.m. or 10:00 p.m. has been discussed. Hikers and climbers should plan their activities to meet this schedule.

If climbing parties know they will be doing a long day climb (starting at 3:00 a.m., for example) and not arriving back at the trailhead until midnight, they should consider acquiring a bivy permit. This will allow an overnight stay in the backcountry. Alternatively, climbers can use other areas of the park during the Bear Lake Road reconstruction. The road will be open to private vehicles during the winter months when there is no reconstruction occurring. Once reconstruction is completed, visitors doing extended day hikes or climbs will have the opportunity to use the road and to park at a trailhead early in the morning. Parking would be available on a first-come-first-served basis, and once the parking lots are full, visitors will have to use the shuttle buses or go elsewhere.

19. *For the Glacier Gorge parking lot, will the shuttle buses have to make a left turn across traffic to enter the lot, with resultant delays to the bus schedule, and alternatively causing traffic back-ups?*

The shuttle buses traveling downhill from Bear Lake will make a right hand turn into the parking lot. This maneuver will not affect the uphill lane of traffic. However, the shuttle buses going uphill toward Bear Lake will have to make a left turn into and out of the parking lot. Vehicle traffic is not expected to impede the shuttle buses enough to cause substantial delays.

Alternative 3 -- Comments

1. *Often, visitors feel that the National Park Service is discouraging use of the Park by making parking as difficult as possible. You should do everything possible to increase the amount of parking.*

Preserving and protecting our resources and providing for the "freest use for recreational purposes" is our mandate. Because of concerns expressed by the majority of the public that commented on the EA, we have decided not to increase the number of parking spaces other than at the VTS parking lot. Parking will increase from 208 to 350 parking spaces at the VTS parking lot. This decision will accommodate anticipated growth in recreational use with the least amount of environmental impact, which is our mandate.